

..Stories Around Richmond..

By NEVIL G. HENSHAW

The Prophecy of Jabez Stone.

It has been the custom of certain eminent authors to start their stories with a prophecy made by some important characters. Afterwards, towards the end of the book, they will have this prophecy gloriously fulfilled, thereby placing the chosen character upon a pedestal of incontestable truthfulness.

Now, it has always been my desire to do something of this sort, and so, if you will forgive me, I am going to experiment upon you, gentle reader. If you care for experiments read a little further. If you do not, turn over and look at the advertisements, which, after all, are the real fact.

Jabez Stone was an old Confederate veteran, who kept a little gun shop upon a shady side street. He was tall and thin, and grizzled, and he walked always with a limp. If you questioned him about this limp he would tell you the story that led up to his prophecy. Sometimes he would tell you the story anyhow, whether you questioned him or not, and always it took him the better part of an afternoon to do so.

It was a wonderfully accurate story, containing the names of generals, of each individual member of his company, and even the names of other people who had no connection with the plot, and were brought in solely for genealogical reasons. But I haven't the time to tell it all to you, even if you had the time to devote to it, so I am going to write it out in my own way.

Some forty years before Jabez had been with the beleaguered Confederate forces in the city of Petersburg. He held the rank of sergeant, and at odd times looked after the mending of his company's rifles, having a talent for that kind of work.

One evening, having decided to do a little scouting on his own hook, he went out to the end of the Confederate lines. Here he noticed a suspicious blue spot amid the feathery greenness of a pine tree some ways off, and slipping over the breastworks he began to crawl snake-like toward it.

Half way through the breastworks and the three he rose carefully upon one knee and prepared to fire. But at this moment, as bad luck would have it, his knee came in contact with a sharp piece of stone, causing him to start and press suddenly upon the trigger. And so the rifle went off, sending the bullet harmlessly into the air, while Jabez, lying flat upon the ground, sought to efface himself.

Then it was that the Yankee sharpshooter in the tree began to take notice of things.

"Poor shot Johnny," he shouted. "Perhaps you'd have better luck next time, only there ain't goin' to be no next time."

Jabez appreciated the truth of this remark, for his rifle was a muzzle loader and was now about as useful to him as an ice cream fork in Hades. Also should he attempt to crawl to the cover of the breastworks the sharpshooter would pin him to the earth like some poor specimen of the caterpillar.

Raising himself to a sitting posture, Jabez sighed resignedly. "All right, Yank," he called, "do it quick an' get it over with."

But the sharpshooter was deliberate and game was scarce. Also he was smitten with a sudden, comic idea.

"Not yet, Johnny, not yet, Johnny," he answered, soothingly. "Twouldn't be polite. We Yanks have come down here to visit you Johnnies an' it's your place to be sociable to us. Now you ain't introduced yourself to me nor told me who you are, which ain't proper. When you do so I'll send you my visitin' card. It's in my rifle here, an' in case you ain't got time to read it when you get it I'll tell you what it says, which is—Compliments of Henry

Adams, Eighteenth Pennsylvania, U. S. A."

Then he laughed uproariously at the humor of his remarks.

But Jabez was not so appreciative. "You go to hell," he called, and dropping upon all fours he began to crawl toward the breastworks.

"Wait a minute, Johnny, you're forgettin' my card," jeered the sharpshooter, and aiming carefully at the small of Jabez's back, he fired.

Instantly Jabez crumpled up like a wet rag and lay face downward, as motionless as the scattered stones about him.

The sharpshooter, after gazing at him critically for a moment, reloaded his rifle and prepared for the next victim.

"An' I calculate you've beat me to the place you invited me to," he observed contentedly, as he turned his gaze toward the Confederate lines again.

But in this observation he erred, for Jabez was not dead. He had the sharpshooter's visiting card, it was true, but it had caught him in the hip far below the spot appointed for it. Also did Jabez have the Yankee's bitter jest to keep him company while he lay feigning death beneath the blood-red rays of the setting sun.

When the sun finally dropped behind the horizon the sharpshooter crawled from his cramped position and sauntered off toward camp, lamenting the smallness of the day's bag.

A few moments afterwards Jabez rolled over with a groan to make his prophecy. Gazing toward the shadowy blotch of the pine tree he shook his empty rifle at it and uttered the fateful words.

"I'll kill you yet," he panted, "an' with this same old rifle, too. Send me your visitin' card, would you? Well I'll send you mine some day sure's the Devil's a tinker. I don't know when I'll be, but you'll get it, an' with this empty rifle, if I have to beat your brains out in the sendin' of it."

Then he fell back on his face and made his solemn way to the breastworks and the surgeon.

When Jabez got out of the hospital he became a sharpshooter, and put in most of his spare time looking for Henry Adams, but never found him. After the war he still continued his unsuccessful search, until through sheer weariness he finally gave it up and placed the matter in the hands of fate.

And so he finally drifted to Richmond, opened a little gun shop, and hung the ancient rifle above the door to act as a sign against the finding of his enemy. Also he told his story to everyone until he became a nuisance.

To his wife he told it from the first day of their courtship to the last day of her life. Afterwards he told it to his daughter Minnie, always with each minute detail and the continually expressed conviction that the prophecy would be fulfilled.

Minnie was very small and very pretty. All day she worked as stenographer in a lawyer's office, playing havoc with the letters of the English alphabet. At night she played havoc with the peace of mind of Bob Hooper, her affianced lover.

Hooper was a cashier with an excellent position and prospect. When he got it he and Minnie would be married. In the meantime he called each night at the room above the gun shop to enjoy the pleasures of anticipation.

But there is ever a fly in the ointment, and Hooper had his in the person of his prospective father-in-law. Each night, and always at the most unpropitious moment, would the old veteran make his appearance in the little sitting room. And once there he would lead carefully up to the story of his prophecy, telling it all if he received the slightest encouragement.

At first, through politeness, Hooper had listened attentively, until the thing

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had finally become unbearably monotonous. Now he had decided to break it up, even at the cost of a little rudeness.

Accordingly he called one night in the early winter, mentally lying in wait for Jabez and his continuous story. A little later the old veteran came into the room and passed for a moment at one of the front windows.

Outside the north wind howled mournfully, swinging the ancient rifle from side to side as it hung above the door of the gun shop below. By the light at the corner Jabez examined the face

of the old man with a critical eye.

"Them wires is gettin' mighty rusty," said he. "First thing you know they'll break an' pitch the ole rifle on the sidewalk, an' bust it all to pieces. Then where'll I be when I meet up with that Henry Adams? I kin hear him now yellin' from his tree. 'Not yet, not yet, Johnny,' sez he."

"Oh father please," began Minnie plaintively.

Hooper turned about in his chair and faced the old man resolutely.

"See here Mr. Stone," he asked, "isn't it about time you let up on this Henry Adams business? The chances are he's been dead for years, and even if he isn't you'll never find him. Don't you think you might let us off just this one time?"

There was a long silence, while the old veteran gazed at his questioner until that young man squirmed in his chair with apprehension. Then Jabez opened his mouth and paused with his hand on the knob.

"I'm goin' now, so don't be worried," said he very slowly. "I reckon you're right, young man, but I didn't mean to bother you. I oughter had more sense, though, than to bring a couple of lovers like you two'd be interested in an ole man's stories."

"But you've said somethin' I can't forget an' somethin' that hurts me, too, seel'n's it shows you ain't got no faith in me. You say Henry Adams is dead an' I'll never get him, an' my prophecy's all a lie. Well you're wrong, cause I'm goin' to get Henry Adams, an' to prove it I ain't goin' to let you marry my Minnie till I do it him. You're a rash young man I know, an' you'll make her a good husband, but you don't get her till this here prophecy you've jeered at comes true. Now, if you've got any faith in me you'll hang on to Minnie an' wait. If you ain't you kin find some other gal, an' I'll be glad to get rid of you an' she oughter be too."

And with this he went out and closed the door, leaving Hooper to be comforted by the fearful Minnie, who assured him that her father would most certainly stand by what he had said.

The next evening Hooper burst into the gun shop and sought out Minnie in a state of the wildest excitement.

He must see her father at once, he said, and come to some agreement with him about their marriage. Only that morning had the proprietor, with the long coveted position, sent for him and made him an offer that exceeded his wildest dreams. There was one stipulation, however. The man who had held the position before had been single. Also he had developed a decided taste for chorus girls, to the great detriment of the firm's money supply.

Now it was an ironclad rule that all who held the position in the future must be married men. The proprietor liked Hooper, and thought that he was just the man that he wanted, but he must marry before he could qualify. To this end then the place would be held open for the space of one week that Hooper, with the assistance of Cupid, might combine business with romance to his everlasting benefit.

get the matter when he sees how much it will mean to both of us."

But Jabez had no such convenient memory. He accepted the apology and said that he was sorry that affairs had taken such a turn. However, his prophecy meant more to him than Hooper's position, and it was sure to be fulfilled. If the young man was willing to wait he could do so. It he was not he could marry some one else and take the position.

And this was all the satisfaction that they could get out of the old

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"An' your regiment?" persisted Jabez hoarsely.

The man opened his eyes and sat up, while the flame of his life burned brightly before it was quenched forever.

"The old Eighteenth Pennsylvania, God bless her," he shouted. "Union forever, boys, an' give the Johnnies hell."

His head dropped forward, while his eyes grew dim.

"An' give the Johnnies hell—the Johnnies—hell," he muttered drowsily as he fell back limply into Jabez's waiting arms.

There was a sudden sound of footsteps outside and Hooper entered the room.

Behind him came Minnie, walking very slowly. Her cheeks were flushed, her head was bent, and in her eyes there was a strange look—a look of pleading and of shame. Half way across the room she raised her head and caught sight of the still figure in her father's arms.

"Why father what has happened?" she cried.

Very tenderly the old veteran laid back the dead body of Henry Adams and rose to his feet. His face was sad and his hands trembled, but there was also about him an air of triumph—the triumph of one who has gained something for which he has waited many years.

"It's the prophecy come true," said he slowly. "This here pore feller's Henry Adams, an' the ole rifle fell on him an' kille him jest as I prophesied it would ten years ago. I'm sorry now it's happened, but it couldn't be helped. 'Twas bound to be so."

"An' now, young man," he continued, turning to Hooper, "you see I ain't no liar after all, an' what's this man's death is your happiness. So be thankful for the luck that's give you your job an' your gal, when it didn't have but a few hours to do it in."

And he looked at the young man sternly, pointing to the dead body upon the floor.

But Hooper shook his head and turned away with a sudden shiver of fear.

"Thankful nothing," answered he indignantly. "It's you who ought to be thankful for the fulfillment of your cursed prophecy, if you are half-hearted enough to be so. That poor fellow didn't do me any good by dying, thank God, for Minnie and I were married an hour ago."

And then he turned and looked at the dead body upon the floor.